

Accompong Maroons Celebrate

On Wednesday, January 6, thousands of Jamaica will travel to St. Elizabeth to partake in one of the country's best kept secrets - the annual Maroon Festival in Accompong.

The day usually starts with a ceremony paying respect to Maroon ancestors at the Peace Cave, which is thought to be the site of the signing of the 18th century treaty between the Maroons and the British. This is usually followed by feasting, dancing and traditional Myal drumming. It culminates in a parade and street dance that continues throughout the night.

This is a tradition which many Jamaicans are still yet to experience and which many visitors to our shores have still to hear about. With the festival just days away, it has once again brought into sharp focus the wealth of cultural and heritage sites which are still to fulfill their tourism potential. Director of Culture in the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture, Sydney Bartley, notes that events such as the Maroon Festival in January, and the celebration of Nanny Day in Mooretown, Portland, in October, can be significant foreign exchange earners. "It has economic opportunity for its educational value, because there are universities in America that would do anything to take students down to something like the Maroon Festival to hear real Maroon music. so it has economic value or what we call education tourism," he explains. Mr. Bartley is also suggesting that the various maroon communities could recreate and sell Maroon artifacts, such as weapons used in Maroon wars, as well as use drama to recreate events, such as the young warriors' races, that were used as an initiation exercise for Maroon boys. He notes that food, anecdotes, proverbs and myths are also a part of the heritage product that can be marketed. The Maroon Villages are just a few of the Jamaican heritage sites which have yet to maximise their earning potential. Mr. Bartley says many developing countries focus so much on traditional tourism products that they sometimes fail to recognise the value of cultural industries. He is encouraging private sector interests to invest in heritage sites, such as Fort Charles and Seville. He stresses that the stories behind heritage sites are their key selling points, as many tourists are interested in knowing the history of the inhabitants of a country. He notes that the simple telling of the stories by tour guides can earn income for the communities. He is suggesting recreating the atmosphere of Port Royal, so that it will look as it did before, but admits that this requires serious investment. "When you go Havana, Cuba, or Cartagena in Columbia, there is something called old Havana, and old Havana looks exactly like it was when Havana was a part of the Spanish Colony. People are able to restore these old buildings to their original situation, and tourists come from as far a field as ever and they visit these sites just to see it in its original form," he illustrates. However, for Mr. Bartley the story and physical infrastructure is just part of the package that can be sold. He says the greatest potential for earning lies in value-added benefits. He explains that this is particularly true for maroon villages, and communities which have very little economic development. Whereas many Maroons have migrated from their villages because of lack of work, Mr. Bartley maintains that if the maroon festivals are properly developed and marketed, they could lead to community development. He also notes that inherent in the holding of festivals, is the opportunity to earn from spin-off activities. "Any time you have a heritage festival all the old things that are not normally done anymore becomes automatically saleable; so the food becomes saleable, the donkey ride becomes saleable, any old time thing," he added. He also notes that the festivals can create interest among visitors to want to return to see the villages, when things are normal. Regarding theories that commercialisation of cultural products could erode their authenticity, Mr. Bartley acknowledges that the 'bastardisation' of the culture is a concern. He states that some aspects of this has been creeping into the celebrations at Accompong, where "rather than realising that the best way to make money is to create maroon craft and sell it, they go for the normal things that anybody can get anywhere else". He says that if such practices are not kept in check, the activity could end up being commercialised to the point where the actual heritage aspect is lost, and visitors are disappointed because they do not get what they came for. Mr. Bartley states that the Ministry is working with the Maroons to ensure that commercial interests do not erode the authenticity of the festivals. However, he says that the Maroons at Mooretown have taken the lead in the preservation of their cultural practices, by ensuring that only authentic Maroon activities take place on Nanny Day. "At Mooretown, you are going to see authentic Maroon culture, you are going to see Maroon people drumming and dancing, getting into Myal, because they are celebrating Nanny. They go to the bump grave where Nanny is buried, and they don't see it as a tourist thing, they see it as an authentic day in which they are doing their thing. You are coming there to watch and they are not stopping you but they are not paying you any mind either," he elaborates. Mr. Bartley adds that organisations such as the Jamaica National Heritage Trust (JNHT) are important in ensuring quality control with regards to heritage products, and that the sites are not overrun with too many tourists. He noted that control of traffic through the sites is particularly important for places such as Devon House, which can be easily damaged if not properly managed. However, Mr. Bartley believes that the greatest threat to Jamaica's heritage products, and particularly cultural practices, is the tendency of Jamaicans to prefer new things over older ones. "We have this thing about getting rid of things that are old and replacing them with things that are new and modern. That is one of the greatest obstacles to heritage development in that kind of way, because then we don't see the old as valuable and you have to be able to value heritage for you to understand it and make it work," he concluded.